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ABSTRACT

The information contained in this report about education in the U.S.S.R. was gathered from interviews and observations made in Russia in 1972. The formal set-up of the school system is described, along with observations on work and play activities, corporal punishment, scheduling, and day-to-day classroom operations. The report also contains a concise summary of data on the elementary school teacher in the Soviet Union, including such information as teacher preparation, salaries, teacher evaluation, and teacher unions. The report stresses how education shapes the future of the Soviet citizen by emphasizing communist ideology and by giving the young person a social identity. (CS)

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Childhood Education in the Soviet Union Today

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The following information about education in the U.S.S.R. was gathered from interviews and observations made during my visit to Russia in December, 1972. As it happened, the 50th anniversary of the founding of the U.S.S.R. was celebrated in December, 1972 and an air of excitement, a holiday spirit seemed to permeate the atmosphere. Red flags decorated buildings and bridges, lampposts and flagpoles. Pictures of war heroes and political leaders were on display everywhere; people gathered in the streets and engaged in animated discussions.

We were enthusiastically welcomed by school administrators and faculty, many of whom spoke good English and were ready to handle the avalanche of questions we had prepared. In the Soviet Union high priority is assigned to education, particularly education of the young people. Bringing up junior is considerably less of a private matter in the U.S.S.R. than it is in our country (Bronfenbrenner, 1970). Children in the Soviet Union experience collective upbringing from the first few months of life. Women work and leave their children in nurseries or kindergartens. Today, there are 9.5 million children, ranging from a few months to seven years of age, in pre-school institutions where they are taken care of by trained attendants or upbringers. The attendants are trained to give special attention to the language development of the child, and to watch over his social and emotional growth.

It is interesting to note that corporal punishment is inadmissable in the Soviet Union. Children learn discipline by what is psychologically called "love withdrawal." The child is threatened with loss of acceptance and guilt feelings are engendered for wrong-doing with the effect that the youngster acquires a set of ethics that guide his behavior.

Work and play activities center around communal considerations; competition is suppressed and youngsters are sensitized to group opinion. Cultural and

expected to contribute to the community by accepting various responsibilities. For example, they serve at meal time, do gardening, or take care of animals. Affection for children is openly expressed. It is not unusual for a stranger to speak to a child on the street and in turn, be addressed by that child as "uncle" or "aunt".

Children enter the first grade of formal schooling at the age of seven but voices are now being heard that call for a starting age of six years. Throughout the country, school begins on September 1st which is a national holiday. Weeks before, celebrations herald the great day. Educators and celebrities are interviewed on radio and television, plays and speeches stress the significance of education.

When the important day arrives, parents accompany the children to school. In front of the school building principals and teachers welcome the children and congratulate them for they are about to enter a new phase in their lives. Instead of the proverbial apple, children bring flowers for the teachers with whom they establish a warm and friendly relationship. In the Soviet Union, school is regarded as a second family where children gain not only factual knowledge but also are given emotional support and make lifetime friends. School plays an important part in character formation.

One morning we observed an elementary class; the lesson was conducted in English and the teacher clearly sought to disseminate communist values and ideals. She began by asking: "Children, what holiday are we preparing for?" The reference was obviously to the 50th anniversary of the founding of the U.S.S.R. "With what traditions do we meet great holidays?" The children answered: "Great holidays are met with rallies of famous people, with rallies of our [illegible]. Great holidays are met with [illegible]." The teacher urged the children to elaborate on these [illegible] and so they described how parents and children undertook new labor obligations and

fulfilled them ahead of time in honor of the jubilee. Children reported that their "labor obligations" consisted of studying hard, for to be a good student was a sacred duty for their country. They told how they participated in socially useful labors, for example, they collected waste paper, newspaper, scrap metal, and they helped younger pupils with their studies. The youngsters were excited about the lesson and tried to show off what they knew.

Children are mostly tri-lingual (Jaktarova, 1973). They speak the native tongue of the republic where they are born, for example, Ukranian or Georgian, they learn Russian, and English. There is a growing trend to make the study of the Russian language compulsory and to use Russian as the common language among the Soviet republics(Slavin, 1972). Parents may elect to send their children to a school where instructions are given in the native tongue of the republic and then Russian is taught as a second language or children may attend a school where they are instructed in Russian and then the native tongue is studied as a second language. The great interest in the English language may be an indication of the importance the Soviets place on the Western World. We, as tourists, benefitted by this fact for when we were lost in the Metro, the subway in Moscow, it was possible to find someone who spoke English and directed us to the hotel.

In Leningrad, the first school we visited was an elementary school. A student teacher guided us through the school building which was well maintained despite the fact that it was more than one hundred years old. We noted the rooms were painted in cheerful, light colors, cream, pink, or blue. Classrooms were supplied with television sets, tape recorders, maps, globes, and wallspace was used to exhibit children's paintings and pictures. Girls were dressed in black skirts, gray stockings, black shoes, white blouses with orange scarfs and black coverall aprons. Boys were grey suits, white shirts, and black ties

Generally, the atmosphere in school seemed to be a relaxed one.

Children stay at the same school for their elementary and secondary education. There are eight-year and ten-year schools; each school offers three years of elementary grades and five or seven years of secondary courses respectively. Graduates of an eight-year school enter a three-year vocational school and subsequently enter the labor market. Graduates of the ten-year school are eligible for higher education, they are likely to enter a medical school or a teacher education institute where they enroll in five-year programs.

We are told that a central goal is to equalize educational opportunities for all children, regardless of family background or location and that selection of students for eight- or ten-year schools is based solely on merit. Education is free and students who are in need are eligible for government stipends to cover living expenses. Textbooks are free and are revised every five years to bring the content up to date. Financial allocations are supposedly the same for all schools, the number of subjects taught, the succession of subjects, and the textbooks from which subjects are taught are the same in all equivalent schools. These practices are designed to produce uniformity in education in accordance with educational objectives, decided upon by the Central Ministry of Education. A seven to eleven year old, for instance, should have developed self-discipline, be able to maintain friendships, and understand the meaning of truthfulness. The notion of truthfulness involves, among other things, publicly discussing the misconduct of a friend. The story is told of a young man, named Pavlik who embraced the ideal of truthfulness and publicly denounced his father as a traitor. For this act the villagers stoned Pavlik, but today he is regarded as a hero and worshipped by young people.

PS 007298

A typical school day in the Soviet Union begins at 8:30 and lasts till 12:30 for the younger child and until 3:30 for children in the upper grades. However, pupils can remain in school as late as 7 o'clock in the evening and eat dinner there for about 50¢ a meal. Working parents are thus relieved from worrying about where and how their youngsters spend the afternoon and evening.

Children attend school six days a week and except for week-ends get daily homework. Incidentally, pupils' workload, the time spent studying in school or at home is regulated by the Minister of Education. A lesson lasts forty-five minutes. Classes accommodate thirty to forty-five children who are divided, for instructional purposes, in small groups of six to ten pupils each.

One of our visits took us to the Trade Union of Teachers in Moscow where we attended a seminar on curriculum construction and development. We were advised that a new curriculum is being developed to incorporate increasing knowledge in different areas of learning (Lobov, 1973). A new curriculum represents a joint venture between teachers and specialists in the field, and is sponsored by the Minister of Education. During the first year a new program is tried out in experimental schools. Teachers' reactions are invited and their suggestions used as the basis for modifying the program. Because of experimentation and modifications, it may take six to seven years before a curriculum is introduced into all schools. Students must take all courses prescribed in the curriculum, electives such as modern dance and music are additional.

There are special schools for the physically handicapped, the mentally retarded, and the intellectually gifted. Also, drama, music, languages are taught in specialized institutions.

In some way, the reader might gain the impression from this report that Soviet education provides little opportunity for the expression of individual differences. Extra curricular activities provide the necessary outlet for

different talents and interests. One student told of corresponding with a pen pal in Havana, Cuba; other youngsters described their dancing lessons and particularly mentioned the cha-cha-cha. Dancing is considered a kind of sport and is encouraged. Numerous amateur societies keep the young people busy after school hours. Just to mention a few, there are literary societies, sports clubs, the International Club. The International Club is a club of friendship and is in existence since 1967. Members correspond with students in Canada, England and the U.S.A. We were shown drawings and paper clippings about to be sent to pupils at PS 8 in New York City, signed "from Russia with love."

Communist youth organizations have branches in every school. Children aged seven to nine join the "Octobrists", the older child aged ten to fifteen joins the "Pioneers", and "Komsocol" organizations are for ages fifteen and up. Children run the clubs by themselves but occasionally invite teachers and parents to function in an advisory capacity.

Exchange programs exist which make it possible for students to study in a foreign country such as England or Canada. Russian students live with English or Canadian families and on their return home may elect to take certain examinations in English.

Young people are strongly motivated by social competitions. They enter contests, present plays, dance, and recite before an audience of teachers, parents, and friends.

A typical Soviet phenomenon is the patronage system whereby school and industry are linked and schools are able to keep in touch with the community. For example, the Institute of Medical Equipment acts as patron for one of the [illegible] schools affiliated. The Institute supplies the school with medical equipment, provides the opportunity for students to do field work, and contributes money for expanding school facilities - building a swimming pool

or a gym.

The effectiveness of a school is measured by its drop-out rate at the elementary or secondary levels, and whether or not students continue with higher education, or go on to do socially productive work.

We asked about youth problems in the Soviet Union and were told that they had problems with discipline, smoking, and drinking, but no drug problems. Perhaps they have more "sticky" problems which they did not care to discuss.

Teaching is a highly respected profession that is primarily in the hands of women. Consider the fact that before the 1917 Revolution women were almost totally illiterate. Today, they are regarded as the molders of the future of the country. The potential elementary teacher attends a ten-year school and after graduation continues her studies at a five-year teacher training college. In her senior year the future teacher gets her work assignment from the Ministry of Education. The young teacher joins the Trade Union of Teachers in order to protect her rights. The union is concerned with teachers salaries, workload, and fringe benefits.

The initial salary for a beginning teacher is 100 rubles a month or $140.00 in American money. Teachers salaries and work conditions were said to be the same in all localities, there are, however, exceptions. Teachers who supervise a department, those who work with mentally or physically handicapped, or those who are appointed to a school in a remote district receive increased salaries. Generally, teachers salaries are equal to salaries of engineers and doctors in the Soviet Union.

In the elementary grades the same teacher handles all subjects, in the secondary grades teachers are specialized. Every two to five years teachers take in-service refresher courses to keep up to date with new teaching methods and be informed about revised course material. During the winter terms

teachers attend conferences, where they meet colleagues and exchange experiences. Some teachers travel to foreign countries like England and Canada in search of broader educational perspectives.

Teacher performance is evaluated by a committee of peers and administrators but not by students. Evaluation is made on a five point scale in terms of classroom techniques, teacher initiative, attitude toward work, and attitude toward colleagues. Information as to how these categories are defined was unavailable to us. The Soviet teacher seems dedicated to her profession and as one principal noted: "Teaching is like a chronic disease, once it gets into your blood, you can't cure it."

In summary, there is no doubt that the U.S.S.R. recognizes the importance of education in shaping the future Soviet citizen. The emphasis now, as before, seems on disseminating communist ideology and to give the young person a social identity. Perhaps, before one can really understand the development of Soviet education, one needs to understand the cultural heritage of the U.S.S.R.

Soviet education is characteristically formal, centralized, and highly structured. However, there are some interesting counterpoints to this description. As the U.S.S.R. becomes increasingly a technological society and the demand for human labor is reduced there are signs of beginning changes. First, young people are kept in school for a longer period of time - efforts are under way to institute universal ten-year schooling; also, an ever growing number of students go on to higher education. Second, programs are being reorganized that focus less on memorizing of facts but rather on developing logical thought processes, learning how to make choices, deal with abstractions, and think independently and creatively (Powers, 1972). Increased emphasis is

accorded those who are involved in intellectual pursuits (Lipset and Dobson, 1972). Finally, education seeks to prepare the young person not only for work, but also for the use of increased leisure time on the basis of his own interests.

It is not difficult to see that these objectives are similar to educational goals in the Western World. These may be hopeful signs that foreshadow the day when differences can be overcome and education will bridge the gap between East and West.

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